DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 770 CS 009 378

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TITLE A Philosophical Analysis of Literacy Education for Children, Youth, and Adults.
PUB DATE Dec 88
NOTE 35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Far Western Philosophy of Education Society (37th, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, December 2-4, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Literacy; *Educational Change; *Educational Philosophy; Elementary Secondary Education; Literacy; *Literacy Education; Reading Research; Relevance (Education)
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; Ekistics; Essentialism; National Assessment of Educational Progress

ABSTRACT

Literacy education for children, youth, and adults in America is in critical need of reconstruction. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) keeps pace with research findings on the basic skills of these groups, yet in literacy education, these findings have not always been used to examine the effects of instructional variables on educational outcomes. The traditional approach to literacy is based on Essentialism, which emphasizes skill building and tests a discrete set of skills. The goal of Essentialism is not to define literacy, but to specify when a person is no longer illiterate. Research, however, supports an Ekistician approach to literacy, which argues that students must learn to reason effectively about what they read and write before they can be considered literate. Literacy must be a means to an end, the end being the fulfillment of the present interests of the learner. In its most recent assessments, NAEP implements Ekisticianism in both its choice of exercises and testing formats. Respondents demonstrate such things as writing a letter to correct a billing error, explaining a warranty for a household appliance, and implementing directions on an income tax form. Each of these calls for reasoning relevant to basic functioning in modern society. There is a need for educators, policy-makers, parents, and students to reconceptualize literacy programs within each state based on the Ekistician view of literacy. (Forty-two references are appended.) (MM)

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A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF LITERACY EDUCATION FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND ADULTS.

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Literacy education for children, youth, and adults in America is in critical need of reconstruction.

In expressing her agreement with this point of view, an experienced teacher of English states the following:

"As a teacher, I have taught a thief, a schizophrenic, an evangelist, and a murderer.

"The thief was a tall boy who hid in the shadows and whom the other children avoided. The schizophrenic rarely spoke but gazed at me with tiny eyes filled with terror. The evangelist was class president and the most popular boy in school. The murderer sat and stared out the window, occasionally letting out a shriek that would shiver the glass.

"The thief stands looking through the bars of his prison cell. In the state mental hospital, the schizophrenic is restrained from beating his head on the floor. The evangelist sleeps in the church yard, victim of a disease contacted during his missionary work. The police no longer search for the murderer since he was, himself, killed in a barroom brawl.

"And all of them sat in my classroom and listened as I taught.

"I must have been a great help to them. After all, I taught them the difference between a noun and a verb and how to diagram a sentence."

Introduction.

In Public Law 98-511, Section 405(e), the U.S. Congress wisely made provision "for periodic review" of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to keep pace with research findings on the basic skills of children, youth, and adults. Unfortunately, many schools in the various states have not capitalized on the findings of NAEP to examine the effects of instructional variables on educational outcomes. This has been especially true in the case of literacy education.

Research during the last 10 to 15 years in fields such as cognitive psychology, psychology, linguistics, education, and sociology has led

to significant advances in the theory and practice of literacy education. Researchers have concluded that emphasis on skill building at the expense of creating meanings is a mismanagement of instructional time.

The overemphasis on skill building is inherent in the outmoded approach of Essentialism -- an approach that is based upon the concept of reading, for example, as a static process with the reader as a passive recipient of meaning that is contained in the text. The approach implies the existence of a discrete set of skills that, when mastered, add up to reading. In these terms, reading remains the same for all readers and for all types of reading tasks. In this approach students interact more with workbooks and skills sheets (many of them poorly designed) than they do with text. Also, in this approach tests are used to measure skills and the public continues to measure schools by scores on such tests.

Teaching and testing of particular discrete skills remain the backbone of most basal reading lessons. The gap between the best knowledge in reading instruction and that represented in basal readers today is actually widening. Most ironically the current basal readers require more time for reading instruction while they provide less time for students to actually read.

Thus diagnostic and instructional procedures are inconsistent with recent research and current thinking of experts in the field. These procedures include:

1. Inordinate emphasis and time spent on phonic and decoding skills.

2. Too little reliance on context clues in conjunction with phonic analysis.

3. Failure to build on a student's prior knowledge.

4. Undue focus on the accuracy of reading aloud. (Cf., 29)

Who Reads Best by NAEP concludes that "poorer readers receive qualitatively different instruction" than adept readers. Approaches used with poorer readers, for example, are "less likely to emphasize comprehension and critical thinking skills, and more likely to focus on decoding strategies."

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The report also states, reading "approaches reported by eleventh grade poor readers are remarkably similar to those reported by their third grade peers." (3)

Learning to read involves getting the process together. That is difficult if instruction keeps taking it apart. The use of worksheets stems from a view that pupils learn to read by accumulating skills: the ability to recognize vowels or blend consonants, visual and auditory discrimination, left-to-right progression, and so on. This view leads to self-defeating practice.

In the past few decades, because of the clamor of legislators for quantitative accountability, and a "return to basics," particular elements of formal linguistics have dominated most testing in the field of literacy education. The so-called tools -- workbooks and worksheets designed to teach these particular elements -- have paradoxically become the chains that shackle individual initiative and innovation and limit professional prerogative.

Essentialism versus Ekisticianism.

The Essentialist states, "That person is literate who, in a language he speaks, can read with understanding anything he would have understood if it had been spoken to him; and he can write, so that it can be read, anything that he can say." (19)

Such a definition comprises what can be called "an unproblematic model" because it prevents questions about the nature of literacy from being placed at the very center of deliberations. But the definition is especially attractive to Essentialists for the reason that it emphasizes skills that are readily observable and measurable. Questions about the complex nature of writing and reading, for example, can be reformulated as dealing with the extent and degree of encoding and decoding, nothing more.

As Essentialist Charles Fries puts it, "Learning to read...is not a process of learning new or other language signals than those the child has already learned. The language signals are all the same. The difference lies in the medium through which the stimuli make contact with his nervous system. In 'talk' the physical stimuli of the language signals make their contact by means of sound waves received by the ear. In reading, the physical stimuli of the same

language signals consist of graphic shapes that make their contact with the nervous system through light waves received by the eye. The process of learning to read is the process of transfer from the auditory signs for language signals which the child has already learned, to the new visual signals for the same signals." (17)

According to the Essentialist's definition of literacy, then, everything would work fine as long as individuals sought to express or understand essentially the same message they ordinarily communicated orally. While speech, however, is often a more efficient way of sharing information, writing sometimes more efficiently specifies complex subordinate relationships. Writing allows us to generate more detailed messages than we could communicate orally; it allows us, for example, to make statements that rely on the often subtle distinctions between restrictive and nonrestrictive modifiers. It is for this reason that reading comprehension is often higher than listening comprehension for proficient decoders confronted with complex material. (5)

The world of writing and the world of speaking are basically different. While people who are literate might be able to write what they say and say what they write, what individuals say and actually write rarely coincide. In a phenomenological sense it is more realistic to define literacy in terms of skills necessary to encode what one would otherwise memorize rather than what one would speak.

The principal goal of the Essentialist approach is not to define literacy itself, but only to specify the point at which a person can no longer be considered illiterate. The widespread acceptance of this model merely reflects the goals of Essentialists concerned with teaching basic skills to large numbers of people who are generally cut off from both political power and material wealth.

Essentialists may continually refer to the problems of "literacy," but their real interests are elsewhere. "Rather than an end in itself," notes a UNESCO policy statement, "literacy should be regarded as a way of preparing man for a social, civic, and economic life that goes far beyond the limits of rudimentary literacy training consisting merely in the teaching of reading and writing." (40)

This statement is a criticism of those Essentialists whose main concern throughout history and throughout much of the world today

has been with helping masses of people cross a line, for years an arbitrarily defined line as a fifth grade reading level, to become literate.

The inadequacy of the Essentialistic approach is also becoming increasingly more apparent to business and industry. For example, the Center for Public Resources in its important research on Basic Skills in the U.S. Work Force presents data on "the significant gap that exists between business/industry and school system perceptions of basic skills 'adequacy.' " Almost all the companies surveyed identify basic skill deficiency problems in the majority of job categories. However, over 75 percent of the school systems, on the basis of their Essentialistic tests "assess the majority of graduates entering the work force as 'adequately prepared' for employment." In and of itself this disparity in perception is a clear indication of inadequate approaches to literacy education and assessment in our schools.

Furthermore, inadequacy of the Essentialistic approach is becoming increasingly more apparent to the public. Among 13-year-olds, only 1 of 5 (20 percent) are at the reading level appropriate for their age, defined by NAEP as the ability to search for specific information, interrelate ideas, and make generalizations, even though virtually all of them possess the rudimentary Essentialistic reading skills promulgated as being "literacy," attainable at the fourth grade level.

The (National) Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development puts the matter succinctly: "Research leads to a new, accurate view of reading. New tests incorporate the knowledge. Assessment supports good teaching."

Ekisticianism (sometimes called Constructionism or Interactionism), as opposed to Essentialism, is based upon this research, most of it completed by or sponsored by NAEP, the U.S. Department of Education, the International Reading Association, the National Academy of Education, the Alexander-James Study Group, the Coalition for Literacy, World Education, the American Council on Education, the Ford Foundation, the Exxon Education Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Matsushita Foundation, and hundreds of others identified in the various reports of NAEP.

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In using the Ekisticianistic approach, NAEP states, in effect, that skill building for surface understanding (the "rudimentary level" of literacy) is important as a first step but it is not enough, and, most certainly, it is not literacy in and of itself. The student must learn to reason effectively about what he reads and writes before he can be considered literate.

In school and society, a reader must be able to analyze, evaluate, and extend the ideas that are presented, just as a writer must be able to elaborate upon and defend judgments that are expressed. Individuals must know how to get information and know how to use it and shape it to suit their needs.

To consider this aspect of the case is to raise questions about the nature of literacy itself, and to do so we need an entirely different approach to literacy strictly based neither on coding skills nor on any formal features of language.

To understand literacy rather than the boundaries of illiteracy, we must stop relying on the most obvious and superficial differences between spoken and written statements.

While literacy does entail reading and writing it cannot be defined simply in terms of transcription and decoding skills. It is always tempting to see the formal differences between what is spoken and what is written, which are both necessary and readily observable, as the essential differences and hence as a ready means of distinguishing those who are literate from those who are not.

Graphemes and morphemes are different, as Joseph Vachek asserts in his study Written Language, but any effort to locate the essence of literacy in the differences between them is doomed to triviality. (41)

Whereas transcription might remain a facet of literacy, at least for the foreseeable future, the main criterion of literacy is one's ability to create and comprehend the symbolic verbal meanings of texts.

The fundamental obstacle to reading is not decoding but attaining the ability to overcome synecdochic expectations.

Decoding skills may be a prerequisite for reading, but at some point readers must be willing to alienate themselves from synecdochic meanings.

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Readers must learn to relate what they are reading to their personal experiences in order to integrate new ideas with what they know -- accepting, rejecting, or modifying the ideas in the process of considering them more fully.

Abilities similar to those in thinking are also important in writing.

More specifically, then, this basic concept of Ekisticianism emphasizes reading to be the process of constructing meaning through dynamic interaction among the reader's (1) existing knowledge, (2) information suggested by the written language, and (3) context of the reading situation.

In a nutshell, it emphasizes the interactive, constructive, dynamic nature of the reading process:

1. The term interactive is used to indicate that reading is an act of communication that is dependent not only on the knowledge, purpose, and skill of the author, but on the knowledge, purpose, and skill of the reader as well.

2. The term constructive is used to indicate that meaning is something that cannot simply be extracted (decoded) from a text, but rather that it must be actively created in the mind of the reader from the integration of prior knowledge with the information suggested by the text.

3. The term dynamic is used to indicate that the reading process is variable, not static, adapting to the specific demands of each particular experience -- to a particular type of text or reading assignment.

> Thus literacy, according to Ekisticianism, is reading and writing in terms of understanding and creating symbolic verbal meanings stored in some permanent, non-synecdochic form. In modern-day education it is a basic skill to be taught so as to make it possible for individuals (1) to attain the personal goals they set for themselves, (2) to meet the demands made upon them by the society in which they live, (3) to solve the problems they face in their everyday lives, and (4) to enhance their growth and development to keep pace with constantly changing social and cultural conditions.

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How NAEP implements its version of Ekisticianism is clearly evident in both the choice of exercises and testing formats in its most recent literacy assessment. Respondents in this assessment are asked to demonstrate such things as writing a letter to correct a billing error, entering transactions in a check ledger and balancing it, and orally interpreting a lengthy feature story from a newspaper. The testing formats include reading a bus schedule, interpreting an appliance warranty, following directions from a map, and articulating information gained from graphical presentations. Each of these calls for reasoning clearly relevant to basic functioning in our modern society.

Written and oral communication can easily overlap; the key to understanding literacy, however, lies in recognizing the inherently different functions each mode of discourse more readily fills.

The central problem is simply stated: How can we define literate communication with reference to meaning rather than coding skills? How can we demonstrate, in other words, that certain verbal messages belong to the world of writing and others to the world of speech on the basis of their content rather than their mode of transmission?

The essential element in literacy is not transcribed or coded language but symbolic verbal meaning, that is, language used to create meanings that are valuable to others independent of either immediate context or immediate intention.

The opposite of literacy, accordingly, is not simply oral language, but synecdochic verbal communication or context-bound language used to convey a specific intention in a specific context. The opposite of literacy, in other words, is ordinary conversation.

As described by the philosopher H.P. Grice, ordinary conversation can be defined in terms of the implicit obligations to which we necessarily commit ourselves when speaking with others. Since conversation is essentially a social endeavor, Grice believes that the possibility for its success rests on our mutual support of four governing conditions: <u>quantity</u>, which obligates us to give enough but only enough information to sustain the dialogue; <u>quality</u>, which compels us to be truthful; <u>relation</u>, which obliges us to be relevant; and <u>manner</u> which requires us to be perspicuous. Grice writes, the

participants should "have some common immediate aim" and "each party should, for the time being, identify himself with the transitory conversational interests of the other." (18)

When we speak we are usually with others and thus ordinarily governed by the need to reach a mutual understanding, and when we write we are usually alone and thus ordinarily concerned with establishing meaning independent of immediate intent or context.

According to the Ekisticianist, literacy is reading and writing as defined in terms of the ability to understand and create symbolic verbal meanings stored in some permanent, non-synecdochic form.

The Ekisticianistic definition of literacy is the antithesis of the Essentialistic definition, first, for the reason that it identifies the ability to read what one would never hear and to write what one would never say.

To be literate, then, is to be able to send and receive symbolic verbal meanings to a whole new category of individuals -- those whom we can know only through texts.

Second, and perhaps in a more profound sense, in shifting the definitional burden from coding to meaning, the Ekisticianist ensures that specific judgments regarding literacy will always remain open to argument for the reason that we see things not as they are but as we are.

Phonic skills, word-analysis skills, vocabulary skills, auditory discrimination skills, and a host of other skill terms figure prominently in tests of beginning reading, and yet none of these terms actually refers to a skill. The terms refer instead to linguistic knowledge of one sort or another. Though a portion of this knowledge is useful in learning to read, the mere possession of such knowledge is in no way tantamount to the skill of reading. (Cf., 10)

In broad perspective, then, Ekisticianistic approaches to literacy education are an outgrowth of the following observations:

1. Students develop functions and purposes for using language before they develop the forms. Form outside of functional use becomes an abstraction.

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2. The language in literature tends to be real, comprehensible, attractive, and rich in cultural content. As such, it contrasts with the stringently controlled vocabulary and largely skill-based exercises of many basal readers.

3. American pupils spend seventy percent of a typical period of reading instruction filling in worksheets and only seven minutes per day, on average, reading from books -- including their basals. (13)

4. Reading readiness -- defined and practiced for half a century as a set of prerequisites to reading -- is being systematically challenged by Ekisticianistic teachers as well as by researchers.

5. An effective teacher incorporates everything she knows into strategy, teaching the appropriate "skill" at the moment a particular student needs it to understand a particular text that is interesting and meaningful. Text-driven strategies replace the bits and pieces of the "individual skills" approach.

6. "Integrating reading and writing" and "teaching 'reading' and writing" across the curriculum have become the modus operendi for modern, research-based literacy education.

7. The social context for literacy has changed during a single life span "to the point where functional literacy means a level of ability achieved by only an extremely small fraction of the population in 1910. Literacy is no longer the province of a privileged elite minority. It has become a necessary part of functioning in most aspects of daily life." (21)

8. When Robert Yerke tried to do his study on the intelligence quotients of Americans, the U.S. Bureau of Census told him 92 percent of the population was literate. When he tried to administer his intelligence tests he found more than 33 percent of the population could not read the tests.

According to Ekisticianism, then, we need to look at students from the inside out rather than the outside in. The development of new interests begins with the present interests of the individual, no matter what the present interests and the new interests happen to be. Literacy must be seen as a means to an end, the end being the fulfillment of the present interests of the learner.

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In Who Reads Best NAEP states, "Recommendations for good teaching include moving from an overwhelming emphasis on basal readers and workbooks toward (1) a greater emphasis on comprehension strategies, (2) a wider range of higher-quality reading materials, (3) more independent reading for students, and (4) more opportunities for combining reading and writing activities." (3)

As has been pointed out in various ways throughout this paper, how NAEP implements its version of Ekisticianism is clearly evident in both its choice of exercises and testing formats in its most recent assessments. Respondents in these assessments are asked to demonstrate such things as writing a letter to correct a billing error, interpreting a lengthy feature story from a magazine or newspaper, explaining a warranty for a household appliance, and implementing directions on an income tax form. Each of these calls for reasoning clearly relevant to basic functioning in our modern society.

Conclusion.

It is reassuring to know that almost all states in the United States are committed to participation in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. It is also reassuring to see that many joint legislative committees on goals for educational excellence are formulating goal structures based upon the NAEP Ekisticianistic approach in reading, writing, speaking, and listening -- for example, "by grade 12, graduates will have reading skills that enable them to synthesize, evaluate and restructure ideas...; by grade 8, students will be able to search for specific information, interrelate ideas, or make generalizations about subject matter and general reading...; and by grade 4, students will be able to use basic comprehension skills and strategies to locate and identify facts from simple paragraphs, stories, and news articles." Similar goals for grades 4, 8, and 12 are being formulated for writing, speaking, and listening.

Be that as it may, there is a need to be cognizant of changes to be made in the procedures of NAEP. One of these changes will require NAEP to provide assessment information not only for "the whole country but for every state within it, and to do so in such a way that a state or locality can readily produce similar data at the community or even neighborhood level. These data in turn can be compared with data from other communities, the entire state, or the nation, both now and over time."

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For some states this is fraught with danger. Simply put, pupils who are taught by Essentialistic processes do poorly when tested by way of the Ekisticianistic processes of NAEP.

States under the Southern Regional Education Board have learned this the hard way. At their request they have had NAEP make an assessment of the literacy skills of their pupils. By comparing the results from various states, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, and South Carolina were dismally poor and the comparisons turned out to be public relations disasters.

There is no assurance that what happened to Louisiana, for example, would not happen to my home state of Arizona -- most especially when NAEP administers tests at the eighth grade, twelfth grade, and postsecondary school levels. Everyday observation does, however, assure us of the split between the Essentialists and the Ekisticianists in Arizona, with the preponderance of influence being on the side of the Essentialists. Under the circumstances, the consequences of a comparison between Arizona and various other states could be embarrassingly disruptive.

The issues addressed in this analysis are as urgent and consequential as any facing American education today. There is pressing need for a new consensus about the principles, goals, and practices that will guide children, youth, and adults in what they learn and do as they pass through our programs in literacy education.

What is needed is an active coalition of policy makers, legislators, members of boards of education, curriculum specialists, test developers, literacy specialists, administrators, teachers, parents, students, and citizens with the common goal of reconceptualizing literacy programs within each state. The State of Michigan has organized such a coalition and has accomplished such a reconceptualization of its literacy programs. We can learn much from Michigan, just as we can from other states that have done likewise.

At first blush the task seems overwhelming. But we must do our best, being always mindful of the important purposes that schools serve and the real threat that weak schools pose.

While it is true that most discourse about literacy education is concentrated on the utilitarian purpose that sees aims of schooling

principally as advancing the ability of individuals to compete in the marketplace, the truth of the matter is that there is even more at stake. No democracy can long survive that does not assure its children, youth, and adults an education that allows them to take full advantage of the freedom and opportunity that a democracy offers.

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